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# GYANI MAIYA

DATASHEET—Second Edition

SUBHASHISH PANIGRAHI PRESENTS AN O FOUNDATION PRODUCTION  
FEATURING GYANI MAIYA SEN-KUSUNDA · UDAY RAJ AALEY  
TRANSLATIONS UDAY RAJ AALEY · EDITOR ANANDA K.G.  
CO-DIRECTED BY UDAY RAJ AALEY · SANJIB CHAUDHURY  
WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY SUBHASHISH PANIGRAHI  
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY & O FOUNDATION

"GYANI MAIYA"——Dataset

Second Edition of the 2019 documentary film "Gyani Maiya", written,  
directed, and produced by Subhashish Panigrahi.

"Gyani Maiya" is available online at <https://archive.org/details/gyani-maiya>  
under Open Access.

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# GYANI MAIYA

*"It created an awareness of the vast amount of linguistic diversity that exists in South Asia to individuals on the other side of the world, as well as the importance of preserving and immortalizing a language on the brink of extinction."*

—RAMIL MERCADO, Asia Matters For America

*"Bà Gyani Maiya Sen nói về thực trạng đau lòng: Không còn ai nói tiếng Kusunda".*

(trans. Ms. Gyani Maiya Sen talked about the heartbreaking situation: No one speaks Kusunda.)

—PHAN BẢO, Tuổi Trẻ

*यो डकुमेन्ट्रीले कुसुन्डा भाषाको संरक्षणमा महत्वपूर्ण भूमिका खेल्ने अध्येता आलेले विश्वास व्यक्त गर्दै*

(trans. This documentary expressed the belief that scholars have played an important role in the preservation of the Kusunda language.)

—Himal Khabar

# FOREWORD

“None will speak it after I am gone”—the last words of Gyani Maiya, the speaker of the Kings’ language, Kusunda of Mihaq community got extinct with her passing away last year.

It’s a sensitive and heart-touching film that homes in the effects of macro-historical processes that languages go through while the indigenous speech communities are dislocated from their

natural habitats. One of the least studied and considered ‘isolated’ languages by linguists as no one has been able to find its antecedents so far, Kusunda livens up in this short film as Gyani Maiya speaks fluently intermixing some words from the local language about the gone days and laments that “language is gone—all over”. She professes and desires that it should be taught but smilingly adds, “there are no learners.”

We should be thankful to Subhashish Panigrahi and his team for capturing some very precious prized moments of Gyani Maiya’s (not an indigenous name) life history in her own words. Language death is not an isolated phenomenon. It is a result of multiple reasons, from the change of language ecology to making speeches redundant in societies. Although the film succeeds in targeting the inevitability of language endangerment in the current prevalent logosphere, it also informs that there is a light at the end of the tunnel by documenting and reviving it.

—**PROF.ANVITA ABBI**

February 24, 2023



# ABSTRACT

The Gi Mihaq (also known as Kusunda) used to be a semi-nomadic hunter and gatherer community that has now settled in villages around the mid-western Nepalese district of Dang. They have long lost their native language Mihaq (Kusunda), to acculturation and a lack of other means for active use. The community also lost their elder Gyani Maiya Sen-Kusunda in 2020, who was the most and the only known fluent Kusunda speaker. Filmed in Kulmor in the Dang District in 2018, this documentary is a memoir of Sen-Kusunda in her own words. It also serves as a biography of her people who have forgotten their language and cultural identity. Kusunda as a language was presumed to be near-extinct as there was little public knowledge of any fluent speaker after Sen-Kusunda. A few years later, the hope of hearing the language of Ban Raja (transl. “king of the forest” in Nepali, an honorific endonym by the Kusunda people.) returned because of two people: Kamala Sen Khatri, Sen-Kusunda’s younger sister who was away from Kulmor, and local researcher Uday Raj Aaley, who took Sen Khatri’s help to pilot an informal school for teaching Kusunda to local children in Kulmor.

This film captures an intimate conversation between Aaley and Sen-Kusunda, who had started working together when Aaley started collecting words in Kusunda to compile a comprehensive dictionary in 2017. Aaley recognises this film to be the most detailed video documentation in Kusunda available to date under an open license.

## PLOT SUMMARY

*“Now, none of the Mihaqs (Kusunda people) speaks the language. The girls have got married and have left for the villages. Boys are getting married in villages”.*

*“We left our language and started speaking others’ languages. It should be taught to others”.*

— GYANI MAIYA SEN-KUSUNDA

Gyani Maiya Sen-Kusunda died on January 25, 2020, in Kulmor near the Dang district of western Nepal, 1.5 years after this documentary was filmed (Chaudhary). At the time of filming, she was presumed to be the last living speaker of the critically-endangered Kusunda language. A language isolate, Kusunda has no known link with any other language, and the native speakers stopped speaking it due to acculturation. To add to that, the Kusunda people struggled to establish political identity or educational or livelihood opportunities in which their language could have played a key role.

The film arguably contains the most detailed video documentation of Sen-Kusunda that is available under an open license. While expressing her anguish for the Kusunda people not being able to speak Kusunda anymore, she also emphasizes her strong desire to keep the language alive. Her husband was from the Magar community, and she witnessed the fall of her language while raising her family.





*Uday Raj Aaley (L) and Gyani Maiya (R). © 2022. Subhashish Panigrahi.  
CC BY-SA 4.0.*

Kusunda people have seen their community merging through marriages with other relatively dominant communities. Over the years, almost all the Kusundas have left speaking their language (Panigrahi). Sen-Kusunda's younger sister Kamala Sen Khatri (Watters) left Nepal to search for a job in India. When she returned home, Uday Raj Aaley, lexicographer, researcher and author from a neighbouring village, pursued the Bhasha Ayog, Nepal's language commission, for a pilot education programme.

The plan eventually saw the day of the light, and both the sisters supported Aaley. This education project resulted in children from Kusunda and other local communities learning Kusunda for the first time. Sen-Kusunda could see her wishes coming true in the last year or so of her life, of the Kusunda children learning the Kusunda language. Aaley's persistent effort to create curriculum and study materials in Kusunda and Khatri's key role after her return from India has helped continue the education pilot.

Aaley plays a key role in the entire film as an advisor, the main interviewer, and the translator. Sanjib Chaudhary, whose Global Voices article inspired the conceptualisation of this film, also joined during filming in his volunteer capacity along with Ananda



## GYANI MAIYA: DATASHEET

K.C, who contributed to the interview and research process.

As someone who has spent two significant decades of her life living in lean-tos in the forests, life does not get any better as the Kusunda community migrates to villages. Deeply poverty-stricken, Kusundas are constantly taunted to “use limbs and work” when they are forced to beg for sustenance. The Kusunda festivals and wedding feasts of lizard meat and yam were a source of joy as adults always searched for resources. One cannot miss the enthusiasm of eighty-three-year-old Sen-Kusunda as she moved from place to place to show the remnants of her heritage.

“Gyani Maiya” was made possible through a grant from the National Geographic Society under the ambit of the OpenSpeaks initiative at the O Foundation (Rajpal).



# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



*Uday Raj Aaley (L) and Subhashish Panigrahi (R) working on translation. © 2019. Sanjib Chaudhary. CC BY-SA 4.0.*

I came across the news about Gyani Maiya Sen-Kusunda and the Kusunda language from an article on Global Voices titled “Indigenous Nepali Language With Only Two Fluent Speakers Sees Pages of Hope in Newly Launched Dictionary”, written by a dear friend and Nepali blogger Sanjib Chaudhary. The article was a reminder of the endangerment of the Kusunda language. The story highlighted how Uday had started collecting words, over 1,000 of them, and created their lexical meanings by discussing them with Gyani Maiya. He lives far from Kulmor, where Gyani Maiya lived with her family. Kulmor is home to many Kusunda, Magar and Tharu families and both Magar, Uday’s native language, and Tharu also face language language endangerment on many levels.

His groundbreaking work resulted in the compilation of the 2017 trilingual dictionary (Kusunda-Nepali-English) “Kusunda Jati Ra Shabdakosh”. The book brought more attention and highlighted the urgency to document Kusunda. Until then, only a

few ethnographers and researchers had studied and recorded Kusunda. Aaley and Timotheus A. Bodt of SOAS University of London also made 20 hours of audiovisual recordings interviewing Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda and Kamala Sen Khatri. They published the observations under open access (Aaley and Bodt).

Sanjib and I started discussing finding a way to document Kusunda. Incidentally, Eddie Avila, one of my mentors and the director of Rising Voices at Global Voices and I got to talk about finding opportunities to document Kusunda. Rising voices has been instrumental in building a network of individual activists, institutions, and collectives focusing on research, development and advocacy for linguistic diversity. It provided microgrants to researchers who wanted to use media and technology for focused projects around low-resource languages. Eddie was kind to advise on ideas and a grant proposal to further OpenSpeaks (a practice-inspired toolkit that I had founded earlier to support citizen documentors and archivists) that I submitted to the National Geographic Society. It all came together as the grant came through.

One thing became extremely clear as we continued to build a plan for documenting Kusunda. Almost all audio-visual documentations made in Kusunda were either unavailable to the general public or under strict copyright restrictions. Most importantly, the Kusunda community had no access to these materials. I was privileged to receive a grant, and the grant was to develop a framework for Open Access archiving of low-resource languages. That is exactly what I went for in terms of licensing. The film and the entire footage are under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0) License, an open and public license that allows anyone to use, create new materials by building upon these ones, and redistribute in any form. Language materials recorded by alien documentors can potentially be misused, and it was certainly a hard choice to go for an open license. In retrospect, it was probably the right choice considering the state of endangerment of Kusunda and the chances of any future copyright restrictions that might stop Kusunda people from accessing the materials. We did our best to explain to Gyani Maiya and asked for her consent and intentions. What is included in the film is her strong desire for the revival of

## GYANI MAIYA: DATASHEET

Kusunda. We spent two days with her for all practical reasons, particularly her availability at her ripe age, which did not allow a longer interaction. I wish I knew that that would be my last interaction with her. Uday was extremely kind, helpful and meticulous in helping translate the recorded conversations between himself and Gyani Maiya in Kusunda and Nepali to Hindi. Then I translated the Hindi translations into English. We would schedule calls on Facebook Messenger, a medium he preferred, and VOIP calls over Skype for the translation. It took way longer than I had imagined getting the subtitles right.

Gyani Maiya not only kept the Kusunda language alive through over five decades of acculturation but also kindly allowed scholars to study it.

As UNESCO estimates, half the world's languages, mostly indigenous, are threatened by permanent extinction in a century. The loss of many endangered, indigenous and other low-resource languages calls for both short and long-term collaborations between speakers of such languages, citizen documentors and archivists who might or might not be native speakers, and archives. The entire film and the footage is slowly migrating to permanent storage on the Internet Archive and Wikimedia Commons.

# DATASHEET

Title: Gyani Maiya

Name in Nepali: ज्ञानी मैया

Name in International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA): [d͡ʒnaːniː  
mɐijaː]

Summary: No community can express the pain of losing an elder, especially when she was the last fluent speaker of their language.

Director: Subhashish Panigrahi

Producer: Subhashish Panigrahi

Cast: Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda (self), Uday Raj Aaley (self), Sanjib Chaudhary (self)

Country of production: India

Country of Origin: Nepal

Filming location(s): Kulmor, Dang district, Nepal

Year of Production: 2019

Release Dates: 10 Dec 2019 (Nepal)

Duration: 25 minutes (appx.)

Genre: Documentary

Distribution company: O Foundation (OFDN)

Production company: O Foundation (OFDN)

Digitization sponsorer: National Geographic Society

Screenwriter: Subhashish Panigrahi, Uday Raj Aaley, Sanjib Chaudhary

Music director: Subhashish Panigrahi

Recordist: Subhashish Panigrahi

Keywords: kusunda, Gi Mihaq, Mihaq, Nepal, indigenous, language, endangered, Dang, Lamahi, Kulmor

Film website: <https://theofdn.org/film/gyani-maiya/>

Permanent archive: <https://archive.org/details/gyani-maiya>  
(film); <https://archive.org/details/gyani-maiya-collection>  
(collection of footage)

LCCN: 2020512171

EIDR/DOI: 10.5240/52AE-86BB-F84D-03B2-D938-U

IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12728670/>

## TECHNICAL DETAILS

Film type: Documentary Feature

Language: Kusunda; Nepali

Spoken Languages: Kusunda; Nepali

Colour Info: Color

Frame Rate: 24 fps

Aspect Ratio: 2.35:1

Captions: English (Closed Caption), English (Open Caption)

## ADDITIONAL CREDITS

Field research and translation: Uday Raj Aaley, Sanjib Chaudhary and Ananda K.C.

Advisor: Eddie Avila (Rising Voices)

Stills: Sanjib Chaudhary

Additional music: Freesound: CC-BY-SA 3.0: Pig Oink Cerdo  
Sound Effect, FX Sounds. ; Stream, Water, C.wav, Inspector. ,  
Bleating goats. Seenms. Goat, LukeIRL; CC0 1.0: Andy\_Gardner,  
Walking barefoot on wooden deck.MP3. SoundsForHim;  
Mokroluskyt\_padla.WAV. 13FPanska\_Mokrolusky\_Tomas. Foley:  
Subhashish Panigrahi, CC-BY-SA 4.0.



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